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## **The Smolensk Tragedy and Its Importance for Political Communication in Poland after 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2010 (Focusing on the Political Incidents in Front of the Presidential Palace)**

**Abstract:** The crash of TU-154 plane on 10 April 2010, which killed the Polish president, Lech Kaczyński, and 95 other members of the presidential delegation, had most of all the consequences on the political system – it became necessary to ensure continuity of the state's authorities, and to organize early elections of the head of state. Controversies over the accident, which occurred just a few days after the tragedy, caused a conspicuous polarization of Polish public opinion (Niżyńska, 2010). The so-called “case of the cross” (concerning the cross which was erected in front of the Presidential Palace by a group of Polish scouts in honour of the victims of the disaster) turned out to be a symbolic expression of the split in Polish society. The language of the public debate about that event took on specific qualities that we want only to sketch in the presented paper. We draw attention to three important factors that constitute “the discourse on the cross”: a) a religious context, b) a context of patriotic martyrdom, c) a political context. Furthermore we tend to show that political communication in Poland after 2010 has revealed only the existing social split, the first symptoms of which are to be sought in the reconfiguration of the Polish party system at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Key words:** Smolensk tragedy, president, political communication, political system, Poland

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### **1. The impact of the configuration of the party system after 2000 on political communication in Poland**

The starting point, at which the language used in the public debate by Polish politicians clearly changed (what was particularly noticeable at the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), was the transfor-

mation of the Polish party system, which took place in the late 90s of last century. It was at that time when Solidarity Electoral Action (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność* – AWS) – the party coalition appealing to the ethos of the trade union (i.e. the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s) which was exceptionally meritorious in the fight against the communist regime – collapsed (see: Szczerbiak, 2004). The expectations of the victory of Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD) – a post-communist party – in the coming election and the threat that AWS would not exceed election threshold made many of the right-wing activists seek new opportunities for political involvement. The two right-wing formations – essential for the subsequent configuration of the political stage – were founded at that time: Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* – PO), assembling conservative liberals and referring to the heritage of European Christian democrats; and Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS), the traditionalist party with its manifesto focusing on the significant role of the state in social and economic life (Antoszewski, 2012, p. 234–252).

SLD's victory in elections of 2001 did not, however, allow the party to get more than half of the seats in the Polish parliament (Szczerbiak, 2001). Therefore it had become necessary for the winners to build a coalition with the agrarian Polish Peasants Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL) (Millard, 2001, p. 367–374). The year 2001 in Poland can be considered as a date of symbolic exhaustion of the possibility to use the historical division of communism vs anticommunism for marketing purposes (Żukiewicz, 2011, p. 351–356). Already a year earlier the course of the campaign and the results of the presidential election proved that this axis of dispute had been losing its impact on voters (Szczerbiak, 2003).

Arrogance of the left-wing government and the political scandal that broke out in 2003 (the so-called Rywingate or Rywin affair<sup>1</sup>), caused SLD to lose public trust. A year later it decided to terminate its cooperation with PSL and to make a change with the respect to the position of Prime Minister, what was to protect the left block against the election disaster comparable to the one that was suffered by AWS four years earlier. Opinion polls, however, clearly showed that PiS and PO had the best chance to win

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<sup>1</sup> A corruption scandal in Poland, named after the prominent Polish film producer Lew Rywin, who was a key figure in it.

in the 2005 elections (Markowski, 2006, p. 814–832). Similar political manifestoes of the two parties let one believe that even if neither of them would get more than half of the parliamentary seats, their post-election co-operation and creation of a coalition government were rather certain. At the most, there was some apprehension about the electoral calendar only: the 2005 parliamentary election was scheduled first, and only after it – the election for president. And the intention to stand as a candidate in the presidential election was announced by Lech Kaczyński, a twin brother of the president of PiS, and Donald Tusk the chairman of PO.

As expected, the results of the parliamentary elections gave no answer to the question of who will form the government. On 25 September 2005 PiS won by 3% of the votes over PO, what allowed the former to fill 155 seats in the parliament, while the latter could count on the support of 133 MP's. According to the prior announcements the coalition negotiations began but they have eventually ended in failure. Three main reasons of the lack of success were indicated:

- a) the leaders of both parties continued to compete in the presidential election, what stiffened the negotiating positions of either party;
- b) it was not the President of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, who was proposed for the post of Prime Minister but widely unknown MP, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz;
- c) negotiations – for the first time since 1989 – were to take place with mass-media present, which was not conducive to the process of reaching a compromise (neither of the participating parties wanted to present itself as the weaker or more compliant).

The situation was further complicated by the announcement of the results of the presidential election. It turned out that, contrary to expectations, it had been won by L. Kaczyński. This strengthened the position of PiS and weakened the one of PO – both leaders' animosity to each other and reciprocal allegations of using unethical methods in the campaign also reduced the likelihood of reaching an agreement (Tworzecki, Semetko, 2010, p. 155–174). In these circumstances, PiS decided to establish a single-party minority government (under the leadership of K. Marcinkiewicz), to which two smaller parties: the nationalist League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin* – LPR) and the agrarian and populist Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland (*Samobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej* – SO) decided to give a vote of confidence. However, over time both above mentioned parties called for institutionalizing of the framework of cooperation – so in May 2006 the coalition agreement was signed,

and in July of the same year the president of PiS, J. Kaczyński, replaced the “puppet” Prime Minister, K. Marcinkiewicz (see more: Lange, Guerra, 2009, p. 527–549; Kochanowicz, 2007, p. 34–39).

Since the negotiations had been broken, PO took on the role of a strong opposition party against the PiS government, and then against the cabinet of PiS–LPR–SO. In the 2005–2007 term parliament in Poland there was a significant coarsening and tabloidisation of the language of politics (Czerwiński, Nowak, Przybylska, 2010). The reasons for this were mainly:

- a) the controversy about the implementation of the “Fourth Polish Republic” political platform – strongly traditionalist, strengthening the role of the state as well as highlighting the importance of squaring up with the past (lustration, liquidation of Military Information Services,<sup>2</sup> strengthening of Institute of National Remembrance<sup>3</sup>); PO protested against this platform, regarding it as an attack on the freedom of citizens, PiS would answer that the opposition refused radical actions because it tried to protect *status quo*, favouring criminal interests;
- b) the participation in the government coalition of populist parties whose MPs – often ill-educated and overwhelmed by their sudden social advancement – became socially famous for their anti-etiquette behaviour (Deputy Prime Minister Andrzej Lepper, in response to charges against the deputy to the European Parliament, a member of Samoobrona, asked at a press conference if “it is possible to rape a prostitute”; Mrs Renata Beger in turn admitted in the tabloids that she loved sex “like horse liked oats” – see: Żimny, Nowak, 2010, p. 345–347);
- c) numerous coalition crises and the increasing belief in the inevitability of an early election, what resulted in a permanent electoral marketing.

In 2007, as a result of provocation of intelligence agencies – thwarted by Deputy Prime Minister A. Lepper (thanks to the information about the expected action, which he received) – the coalition of PiS–LPR–SO collapsed. Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński decided that PiS would support the call for self-dissolution of the parliament and thereby agreed to

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<sup>2</sup> Military Information Services – a common name for the Polish military intelligence and counter-intelligence agency (created in 1990, liquidated in 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Institute of National Remembrance – a Polish government-affiliated research institute with lustration prerogatives and prosecution powers founded by specific legislation (established in 1998).

hold an early parliamentary election. The election in 2007 was of the plebiscitary nature: voters were to declare whether they preferred the previous style of governance by J. Kaczyński (Zimny, Żukiewicz, 2010, p. 300–303), or whether they proclaimed themselves in favour of the “new hand” and of assigning D. Tusk with the mission of creating a new government. This situation was very conducive to aggressive speeches and to creating a negative message (Guerra, Bil, 2009, p. 75–85). In addition, it also deepened animosities between the leaders of both parties which – what is symptomatic – still regarded themselves as representing the interests of the right-wing electorate.

The election of 2007 was won by PO. And with the good result obtained by PSL it quickly became possible for the two parties to come to an agreement on the creation of a new cabinet. This time it was PiS (the runner-up in the election) to play the role of tough opposition in the forthcoming years, although the election result of left-wing coalition – as compared to 2005 – was improved (Szczurbiak, 2008; Markowski, 2008, p. 1055–1068). In this context the president’s office could have been an important handicap for the opposition. L. Kaczyński proved, at least several times, that he was ready to block PO’s initiatives, he also sought to expand its powers in foreign policy.

A few months before the election scheduled for 2010 D. Tusk announced that he would not run for president. Since his party was missing another charismatic figure who could compete with re-election seeking L. Kaczyński, PO decided to hold primaries. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, was defeated by the Chairman of the Sejm, Bronisław Komorowski, who eventually received the party’s nomination before the upcoming election.

## **2. Smolensk air crash**

The start of the election campaign coincided with Prime Minister’s and President’s visits in Smolensk respectively. The reason was the celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyń massacre carried out by the NKVD on more than 20 thousand Polish citizens (half of them were officers of the army and the police) (see more: Cienciala, Lebedeva, Materski, 2007). The conflict between government and presidential centres of powers made the ceremonies attended individually by D. Tusk and L. Kaczyński to be scheduled for two different dates – 3 days apart. The

Prime Minister paid a visit on April 7, the arrival of the head of the Polish state to Smolensk was scheduled for April 10, 2010. The President undertook that journey, accompanied by a large delegation, which included the highest state officials (inter alia Deputy Chairman of the Senate, the President of Polish National Bank, the Ombudsman), parliamentarians, representatives of the military and the families of the victims of the Katyń massacre.

The plane with the president on board took off from Warsaw airport "Okęcie" half an hour late. The flight which lasted about 1 hour and 15 minutes ended tragically. During the landing approach in bad weather conditions (fog thickening), with not fully efficient navigation devices at Smolensk North military airport and due to malfunctioning of the onboard equipment indicating altitude (instruments did not reflect the fact that the plane was at the moment flying over a deep ravine), Tupolev TU-154M's wing clipped the tops of the trees. The loss of part of the plane's wing was the direct cause of the collision with the ground, which happened 500 metres from the airport runway. The crash killed 96 people – all passengers of the plane.<sup>4</sup>

The first official announcements from the Russian side and from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not leave any doubt: both confirmed the crash and the fact that none of the people onboard survived. In this emergency situation, certain political procedures under the Polish constitution were launched. When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the President's death, the duties of the head of the state were taken over by Chairman of the Sejm, B. Komorowski, the main potential rival of L. Kaczyński in the presidential election, scheduled for autumn 2010. Since he was obliged, according to the constitution, to outsource the election within the following 90 days, the election process was accelerated – it was to be held on June 20, and a possible second round two weeks later – on July 4.

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<sup>4</sup> This information is confirmed by both the Interstate Aviation Committee (IAC) report and the report of Polish government commission chaired by Jerzy Miller. Many details could not be determined, and what is more – there are significant discrepancies between the findings of Polish and Russian investigators. Many families of the victims and right-wing circles contest both reports, saying that the crash was the result of a purposeful action by the Russians. Leszek Koczanowicz aptly notes in this context that the only indisputable facts are that the plane had crashed, and that none of the passengers survived the accident (Koczanowicz, 2012).

### **3. Political communication in Poland in the time of national mourning**

The country declared a national mourning week which then – in connection with the planned funeral of the President and his Wife – was further extended by one day. The Polish Prime Minister, D. Tusk, and the twin brother of tragically deceased President, J. Kaczyński, went to Smolensk. At the crash site D. Tusk met with the then Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. During laying flowers at the crash site the Russian Prime Minister hugged D. Tusk in a gesture of consolation. This gesture was considered to be symbolic and was represented many times, not only in Polish but also in foreign media. Later it became a cause of accusations – directed at the Polish Prime Minister – of excessive deference of the Polish government to the Russian authorities (Wróbel, 2011, p. 437–456).

Due to the nature of the disaster and the large-scale of destruction of the plane the procedure of identification of bodies, carried out in the Moscow Institute of Forensic Medicine, was being prolonged. The corpses of the President and the First Lady were brought to the country first, the last body remains – identified only through DNA tests – were transported several days after the crash. At the same time, by virtue of the so-called Chicago Convention, the Russian prosecutor's office began to lead investigation into the Polish President's plane crash. In parallel, Polish military prosecutor office initiated its own investigation – limited, however, by the rules of international law. Both investigations aimed at explaining the causes and circumstances of the air crash.

Due to the scale of the disaster and the importance of its victims, it quickly gained numerous patriotic references in public discourse (Sie-rocki, 2011, p. 357–373). The very place of the accident – in Polish history considered to be a symbolic expression of oppression by the Soviet Union (for decades the communist authorities did not allow the communication of political murders committed by the NKVD during the Second World War) – was used as a metaphor for the suffering and the uniqueness of Poland against a background of other countries. It was especially emphasized that, although there had been a number of plane crashes, in which leaders of different states tragically died, but none of those crashes had never been so fraught with consequences. Except the presidential couple the accident killed also: the last President of Poland in exile, Ryszard Kaczorowski, the heads of important state institutions, parliamentarians

and the two candidates in the upcoming presidential election. This lay ground for comparisons “Smolensk 1940 – Smolensk 2010” (unauthorized, because the scale of both the events was incomparable, and their political context – simply different).

Idealization of the Polish nation and of all the harms which it experienced in its history, were accompanied by attributing exceptional merits to the tragically deceased President. This placed in an especially difficult situation L. Kaczyński's political opponents, who for the sake of the honorific rule *De mortuis aut bene aut nihil* had to either keep silent courteously, or to speak favourably about their political opponent. In the early days of the mourning supporters of the deceased President emphasized his charisma, successes in foreign policy, attention to historical policy, while his opponents, respecting the political and ideological distance, limited themselves to appreciate the patriotism of the President, and also – quite often – to value positively his career as a state official (before L. Kaczyński became the President, he served as the President of the Supreme Chamber of Control, the Minister of Justice, and the President of Warsaw – in this he differed from his twin brother, who devoted his career to party politics) (Szawiel, 2011).

The corset of “political correctness” was definitely loosened at the time when the decision regarding to the burial site of President Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria Kaczyńska was made (Șerbănescu, 2010, p. 245–254). As suggested by the family and with the approval of the Archbishop of Cracow, Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, the presidential couple was to be buried at Wawel Castle – the resting place of Polish kings. As soon as 13 April 2010, when the decision was announced, a group of protesters gathered by the palace of the archbishop. The demonstrators claimed that the tragic dimension of the death of the head of state was not sufficient to ensure that the president should be considered to be remarkably well-deserved for the country. Neither did they hide the fact that they remained highly critical of the policy by L. Kaczyński. Finally, the funeral ceremony took place in Cracow in accordance with the planned scenario, but its importance was diminished not only by arguments – publicized in the media – about the merits of the deceased President, but also by the unexpected eruption of Icelandic volcano which prevented many foreign visitors to come to the funeral.

In case of ambiguity as to the causes and course of events there immediately appeared a question of who is to blame for the events that took place on 10 April 2010. Despite the work of Polish and Russian prosecu-



tors, that only just began, media speculated about the most likely scenario of the accident – bad weather, airport conditions, pilot error or machine failure – but the first voices suggesting that the crash site is not accidental could already be heard. The right-wing media insinuated that the causes of the TU-154M crash might have not only technical but also political background. Circumstantial evidence supporting this version of events were to be anti-Russian foreign policy by L. Kaczyński (eg his involvement in Georgia) and perennial aversion of Russians to Poland and to the Polish nation, heightened by democratic changes in Poland between 1989 and 1991, which resulted in disintegration of the Soviet Union, as well as in the change of direction of Polish “geopolitical vector” from eastern to western (see: Marchwiński, 2012, p. 181–196).

#### **4. The election campaign and the early presidential election**

The subject of who was to blame for the Smolensk tragedy was suspended in the public discourse for the duration of the accelerated election campaign. In the face of the disaster political parties had to change their election strategies. PiS, for which L. Kaczyński was an undisputed candidate, faced the biggest dilemma – the party staff had to answer the question of whether anyone except the brother of the tragically deceased President had a chance of winning, and whether the candidacy of the PiS chairman is at all to be considered (if only for the sake of the trauma associated with the death of his brother and their mother’s illness). Finally it was decided that J. Kaczyński would run in the election against a competitor from PO, who still remained – the acting head of state – Chairman of the Sejm Bronisław Komorowski (Cześnik, 2011, p. 45–63).

The first symptom of providing a non-aggressive style of election campaign were nominations in the PiS campaign staff – Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska, considered to be representative of the liberal fraction in the party, took its leadership, and radical politicians (such as Jacek Kurski, who in the previous election became famous for his extremely negative messages discrediting D. Tusk) were moved away from marketing actions. The subsequent pronouncements of PiS’s presidential candidate irrefutably convinced observers that in the election campaign he would try to create his new image of consensual and benevolent leader (Żukiewicz, 2012).

First, it was decided to move away from history-oriented and martyrdom message. The electoral appeal was to be associated only with the future

of Poland, not with the past events. Secondly, the rhetoric on international affairs also changed. The previous language of “hardness”, “tenacity”, “fight for the interests of Poland” gave way to the appeal of conciliation and implementation of national interests by negotiations and soft means of pressure (so-called *soft power*). The eloquent proof of this transformation was the television spot entitled “Proclamation to the Russians”, in which J. Kaczyński thanked the Russians for their help after the crash of the presidential plane. Thirdly, it was also decided to change the approach to political opponents in the campaign. Formerly created image of the enemy (the opponents perceived as non-patriots, non-Poles, false elite<sup>5</sup>) gave way to critical approach to real activities of the adversaries and the political platform which they presented in the media. A big contribution to that was inter alia the flood in southern Poland, which was used by the PiS chairman to present his vision of the so-called *solidary Poland* (see: Kolczyński, 2010, p. 224–245). This thread of rebranding strategy was developed in the second stage of the election campaign, i.e. in the period between the first and second round of the election, when the candidates of PiS and PO began competing for the votes of Grzegorz Napieralski’s supporters (SLD), who in the first round achieved a relatively good result – 13.7% of the votes. It was then when J. Kaczynski described Józef Oleksy, the former Prime Minister, associated with SLD, as “leftist politician of older-middle generation”, and said of Edward Gierek that he was “a communist, but still a patriot” (Kowalczyk, 2010, p. 219).

B. Komorowski’s strategy was not so revolutionary. PO campaign staff tried to emphasize the qualities of the candidate, well-known to the public: gentleness, stability, quaint old-fashionedness, the ability to discuss. The candidate promised to fulfill specific economic and social demands (such as increasing student discounts for train travels), which were in the hands of the government. But he could act like that because he enjoyed the unquestioned support of the Prime Minister and the PO leader, D. Tusk. B. Komorowski was also given – especially in the second round – a tacit approval from leftist politicians who were determined to endorse the Chairman of the Sejm, considered to be more liberal and prone to cooperation than the PiS chairman. The campaign also highlighted the merits of B. Ko-

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<sup>5</sup> In Polish: *łże-elita* (also translated as *lying elite*), the word (of Russian provenance in structure) first used in 2006 by Jarosław Kaczyński to describe “a mixture of shady businesspeople, semi-retired spies and their hangers-on in the media,” later used mainly as a quotation or ironically which practically made it a buzzword.

morowski as an interim head of state – in fact he was able to ensure the smooth functioning of state institutions and the dignified setting for funerals of victims of the Smolensk plane crash (Kowalczyk, 2010, p. 220–223).

The results of the first round of the presidential election proved that the Polish society did not fully accept the division of the political stage into two dominant right-wing camps: PiS and PO. The SLD candidate, Grzegorz Napieralski, whose decision to run for president also stemmed from the tragic consequences of the events of 10 April 2010 (when former SLD candidate, Jerzy Szmajdziński, died), received in the first round the 13.7% of the votes. In the second round only B. Komorowski (41.5% of the votes) and J. Kaczyński (36.5% of the votes) competed, but the final result put Komorowski with 53-percent support ahead of Kaczyński with 47% of the votes. The victory of the Chairman of the Sejm was not after all so spectacular, and the result of the PiS chairman showed to be much better than the results which his party obtained in the following parliamentary and local governance elections. This certainly influenced the political strategies of the two politicians in the forthcoming months of 2010: J. Kaczyński got the proof of huge public support, which in turn, could not have been ignored by the newly elected president.

## **5. The case of the cross**

On 10 July 2010, a few days after the announcement of the official results of the presidential election, President B. Komorowski provoked public discussion about the so-called cross in front of the Presidential Palace. A few days after the plane crash, on 15 April, a group of Polish scouts spontaneously erected this religious symbol in front of the Presidential Palace in the memory of people who lost their lives in the Smolensk disaster. The area in front of the President's abode, with the cross in its centre, quickly became a specifically "sacred" place – the Poles were coming there to pay tribute to victims of the disaster through prayer, burning candles, laying flowers, leaving private certificates of pain and despair. For about 80 days (until the beginning of July), the cross did not arouse public controversy, the president-elect, however, said in one of the first interviews that the national mourning had passed, and the cross should be moved to another worthy location.

The public opinion was divided over the issue – the part of it was in favour of leaving the cross at the current location (the supporters of this

solution, however, were not unanimous themselves: the more radical group called for leaving the cross for good, the less radical group claimed that one should wait with moving the cross until a plaque or a monument commemorating the victims of the disaster would be placed at the site), while another part agreed with President B. Komorowski and expected this religious symbol to be moved to one of the nearby churches. The contention – known in the Polish public discourse as the dispute “over the cross” – had at least a couple of climaxes (on 3 August an attempt to move the cross was foiled by “defenders of the cross”, on 9 August supporters of moving the cross held a demonstration, on 16 September at night the cross was finally moved to a chapel in the Presidential Palace). Taking into account the arguments used in the dispute, it ran in three – mutually interpenetrating – platforms (each platform had extra dimensions; detailed language determinants, excerpted from the set of texts devoted to the conflict over the cross, are presented in Table 1).

The first of them should be considered as a **religious platform**. The fact that the object of the dispute was the cross – so a religious symbol – meant that the public debate turned into an axiological conflict, which ruled out as a matter of fact the possibility of agreement. Supporters of leaving the cross in front of the Presidential Palace were called in the media the “defenders of the cross”,<sup>6</sup> while supporters of moving the cross – the “opponents of the cross”.<sup>7</sup> Only this simplification showed that in this case the discussion carried out according to Habermasian rational standards (Habermas, 1981) lost its reason for existence – in the media there was almost no space for explanation that one might not be an “opponent of the cross” as a religious symbol but still insist on removal of a certain particular cross from the public sphere.

In course of time, the arguments of “defenders of the cross” were significantly modified. In the conflict, they demanded not only respect for the victims, but protested also against the dechristianization of Poland, atheism’s victory over Catholicism, ousting of the institutions of the Catholic Church from the public space. The “defenders” confirmed their belief that their group is discriminated and ridiculed in Poland. There also appeared elements of religious exaltation in their protests: spasmodic crying, invol-

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<sup>6</sup> In Polish: *obrońcy krzyża*.

<sup>7</sup> In Polish: *przeciwnicy krzyża*.

untary repetition of prayers-spells, overnight guards at the cross. On the other hand, the advocates of moving the cross emphasized the need to maintain the ideological neutrality of the state, opposed to the conceptual phrase "Catholic Poland", and underlined too big a clergy's influence on public life.

In the space of **martyrdom and patriotism** religious symbols effectively merged with the patriotic ones. The "defenders of the cross" were of the opinion that the attempt to move the Smolensk cross is a proof of the lack of respect not only to those who died tragically at Smolensk on 10 April 2010, but also to the victims of the NKVD of 70 years earlier. The crime in the Katyn forest was being reminded and the parallelism of both tragedies was argued. It was during the demonstration held in front of the Presidential Palace when the hypothesis of conspiracy gained particular popularity. The "defenders of the cross" believed that President L. Kaczyński had not *died*<sup>8</sup> in a plane crash, but *had been killed*<sup>9</sup> – what meant that the attack on him had been done by Russians. These insinuations were defined in the Polish public discourse as the "Smolensk coup" (*zamach smoleński*) – and this phrase was used mainly in ironic contexts by the "opponents of the cross". It was also the case with the term "Smolensk fog" (*mgła smoleńska*) – bad weather conditions on 10 April, according to many right-wing circles, had not natural causes, but were the result of the fact that the Russians purposely sprayed mist. For the "opponents of the cross" such suppositions were only the examples of *political paranoia* (*polityczna paranoja*), *extreme blindness* (*skrajne zaślepienie*), *resistance to the facts* (*uodpornienie na fakty*).

In the opinion of the protesters against the moving the cross all who disagreed with them were enemies not only of the cross as a religious symbol, but also of broadly defined Polishness. The priests of the Catholic church, who along with the scouts, were to move the cross in a solemn procession on 3 August 2010, were labelled as *traitors* (*zdrajcy*), while the uniform police, whose task was to prevent riots, were called: *Gestapo*

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<sup>8</sup> In Polish: *zginąć* 'to lose one's life tragically or suddenly' (used especially about those who were killed in accidents or were murdered; the verb with the weak "patriotic" connotation).

<sup>9</sup> In Polish: *poleć* 'to be killed', 'to lose one's life in a fight or in a battle' (used especially about those who were killed in heroic fight or battle against the nation's enemy; the verb with the strong "patriotic" connotation).

and *ZOMO*.<sup>10</sup> The supporters of moving the cross were refused to be called patriots, disavowed was also the victory of President B. Komorowski (who was considered the head of the state elected only by a part of the society). The very idea of moving the cross was being compared to the biggest national betrayals: Targowica Confederation or martial law.

The other party of the contention insisted that the cross was not the symbol of the nation, and therefore on the basis of someone's attitude towards it one ought not to draw conclusions about someone's patriotic commitment. The "opponents of the cross" demanded respect to the democratically elected authorities, and to the decisions that they made. The idea of the state was used as opposed to the religious vision of social relations, presented by the opponents of moving the cross (i.e. "defenders of the cross").

In **political space** the case of the cross allowed to assign arbitrarily social roles and views to both the "defenders" and "opponents" of the cross: so "defenders" are – opponents of the government, PiS's supporters, Catholics, so-called *mohair berets*<sup>11</sup> (*moherowe berety*), zealots, conservatives, traditionalists, *Eurosceptics*, *genuine Poles* (*prawdziwi Polacy*), and even *sectarians* (*sekcjarze*) or *a group of psychos* (*grupa psycholi*), while "opponents" are – supporters of the government, PO's voters, liberals, progressives, *urban secular youth longing for emancipation* (*wielkomiejska mieszczańska młodzież tęskniąca do sekularnej emancypacji*) (Michalski, 2010).

Especially in the official media reports – subject to the dictate of medialization and striving to tell the story with most influential memes – the dispute observer could easily notice a tendency to unilateral (motivated ideologically and/or politically) interpretation of the events which took place in August and September 2010 in front of the Presidential Palace. And so conservative media (some of the Catholic press, "Gazeta Polska",<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In Polish: Zmotoryzowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej (*Motorized Reserves of the Citizens' Militia*), paramilitary-police formations during the communist era in the People's Republic of Poland.

<sup>11</sup> In Polish: *moherowe berety* – a tongue-in-cheek expression that stands for people who support the views expressed by Polish conservative Catholic movement with its main representative being the media strictly connected with Father Tadeusz Rydzyk.

<sup>12</sup> Literally: "Polish Newspaper", a Polish right-wing/conservative weekly (founded in 1993).

Radio Maryja,<sup>13</sup> TV Trwam<sup>14</sup>) presented people camping out by the cross (the “defenders”) as victims (the list of their “oppressors” is quite long: the Donald Tusk’s government, the President of Warsaw, the Russians, the European Union, the liberals, the leftists, “the Jews” etc.), while those people used the language of war and confrontation (*we will defend the cross; the blood will be shed* and so on). In turn the left-wing and liberal media (“Gazeta Wyborcza”,<sup>15</sup> TVN<sup>16</sup>) depicted the anti-state attitude of the “defenders” and considered “supporters” as those who demand respect for law and the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, but they most often overlooked acts of aggression and humiliation directed at the “defenders” (such as spitting, coercive threats, etc.).

Table 1

**The field of associations of MOVING THE CROSS in public discourse**

For the “defenders of the cross”	For the “opponents of the cross”
1	2
1. Religious aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– dechristianisation of the nation,</li> <li>– attack on the most sacred symbol,</li> <li>– moving the cross as a proof of atheism.</li> </ul>	1. Religious aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the defence of the cross as of a symbol of the victims of the disaster is a blasphemy, sacrilege (humiliation of the Passion),</li> <li>– appropriation of the cross – as a religious sign – by the people <i>engaged in a political action</i> (<i>prowadzących akcję polityczną</i>),</li> <li>– loss of the sacred character of the cross.</li> </ul>
2. National aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “erasing” the memory of Lech Kaczyński and of other victims of the disaster,</li> <li>– desecration of the martyrdom of the victims’ death,</li> <li>– “erasing” the memory of the roots of Polish national identity,</li> <li>– national betrayal (<i>Traitors!; Targowica!; an infamous Pole; Judases! – Pol. Zdrajcy!; Targowica!; wyrodny Polak; Judasze!</i>).</li> </ul>	2. National aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>artificial memory</i> and <i>artificial martyrdom</i> (<i>sztuczna pamięć i sztuczne męczeństwo</i>).</li> </ul>

<sup>13</sup> A Polish religious, conservative, anti-communist and pro-life Roman Catholic radio station and media group, describing itself as patriotic (founded in 1991). The station has been at the centre of controversy since its foundation, with many critics arguing that it is vehemently anti-Semitic, homophobic, and xenophobic, and misuses Catholic teaching for political tool.

<sup>14</sup> Literally: “I Keep Surviving”, a Polish TV channel, owned by the Warsaw Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, and financed through donations from its audience – “The Radio Maryja Family” (cf. previous footnote).

<sup>15</sup> Literally “Electoral Gazette”, a leading Polish newspaper (founded in 1989).

<sup>16</sup> A Polish commercial television network (founded in 1993).

1	2
<p>3. Ideological aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– (moving the cross is) an analogous practice to the actions of the XX<sup>th</sup> century's totalitarian regimes (<i>red mafia; Here is Poland, not Moscow; left-wing militias</i> – of the performers of moving the cross) (Pol. <i>czerwona mafia; Tu jest Polska, a nie Moskwa; bojówki lewicowe</i>),</li> <li>– enacting an ideology of new (radical and anti-Christian) left – Zapatero, Obama (<i>fighting with the cross; the attack on Christianity</i> – Pol. <i>walka z krzyżem; atak na chrześcijaństwo</i>).</li> </ul>	<p>3. Ideological aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– factual secularization of social life,</li> <li>– the dispute of the cross as evidence of clericalism of the Polish state and its authorities.</li> </ul>
<p>4. Moral/ethical aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>depraving the Nation</i> (<i>gorszenie Narodu</i>),</li> <li>– <i>spiritual schizofrenia</i> (<i>schizofrenia duchowa</i>).</li> </ul>	<p>4. Moral/ethical aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– moral blackmail (by the “defenders”),</li> <li>– right for everybody to be present at the cross.</li> </ul>
<p>5. Cultural aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “erasing” the Church's influence on the shape of the Polish and European culture and civilization.</li> </ul>	<p>5. Cultural aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– anachronism of identification of Catholicism with national or political identity.</li> </ul>
<p>6. Political aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– permission for the fight of the state against the Church,</li> <li>– “cleaning” the memory of Lech Kaczyński's political options.</li> </ul>	<p>6. Political aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– respect for democracy (<i>struggle against democracy with the cross</i> – Pol. <i>krzyżem walczy się z demokracją</i>),</li> <li>– respect for law,</li> <li>– respect for constitutional secularism and ideological neutrality of the state (separation of church and state),</li> <li>– anarchy,</li> <li>– equality of citizens (protest against exclusion and stigmatization of the supporters of moving the cross),</li> <li>– the cross is symbolic <i>whip for the new president; bludgeon, with which one can beat political opponents; overt sabotage against election results</i> (<i>bicz na nowego prezydenta; pałka, którą można przyłożyć politycznym przeciwnikom; jawny sabotaż wobec wyniku wyborów</i>),</li> <li>– leaving the cross in its prominent position is discredit of the state, evidence of weakness of authority.</li> </ul>
<p>7. Social aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– war for the minds of the audience.</li> </ul>	<p>7. Social aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– fanaticism of the “defenders of the cross” (<i>fanatics, radicals, psychos, hooligans</i>),</li> <li>– violence exerted on state institutions by fanatics,</li> <li>– they are very few (<i>a handful; a small group</i> – Pol. <i>garstka; niewielka grupka</i>),</li> <li>– some of the defenders believe that the Smolensk air crash was the result of a conspiracy, in which the new Polish government was involved.</li> </ul>



1	2
<p>8. Psychological aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the supporters of moving the cross (“opponents of the cross”) are driven by hatred for Lech Kaczyński, Poland, Catholic Church, Christianity,</li> <li>– they are aggressive towards the group of “defenders” (<i>drunken cattle calling themselves Komorowski’s voters</i> – Pol. <i>pijane bydło nazywające się wyborcami Komorowskiego</i>).</li> </ul>	<p>8. Psychological aspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “defenders” actions are aggression (<i>they scream and insult</i>), deepening hatred, creating enemies,</li> <li>– defenders feel encircled, excluded, hurt, alienated, unheard.</li> </ul>

Source: Zimny, 2011, p. 243–245.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The conflict over the cross highlighted in the public space the deep division of the Polish society, which in the biggest simplification can be reduced to a dispute between traditionalism and modernization. Many commentators were surprised not by the existence of such a division (recorded by sociologists in many countries around the world) but by its depth. The arguments used in the public debate were not to convince opponents, they served rather for consolidation of one’s own views, strengthening cooperation within a group of people of similar political sympathies and discreditation of the “them” group. After the conflict over the cross had formally been finished, this method of discussion was not abandoned. Smolensk has become one of the leading subjects of the parliamentary campaign in 2011, and subsequent events related to the disaster and to the actions of the authorities shortly after it provide the justification for using the topic of Smolensk plane crash in the current political struggle.

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### **Tragedia smoleńska i jej znaczenie dla komunikacji politycznej w Polsce po 10 kwietnia 2010 roku (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem incydentów politycznych mających miejsce przed Pałacem Prezydenckim)**

#### **Streszczenie**

Katastrofa samolotu TU-154 z 10 kwietnia 2010 roku, w której zginęli prezydent Polski, Lech Kaczyński, oraz 95 osób wchodzących w skład prezydenckiej delegacji, miała przede wszystkim konsekwencje ustrojowe – konieczne stało się zapewnienie ciągłości władz państwowych oraz zorganizowanie przyspieszonych wyborów głowy

państwa. Kontrowersje w sprawie wypadku, jakie pojawiły się już kilka dni po tragedii, spowodowały jednak także wyraźną polaryzację opinii publicznej. Symbolicznym wyrazem podziału stała się tzw. sprawa krzyża ustawionego przed Pałacem Prezydenckim przez harcerzy w hołdzie ofiarom katastrofy. Język debaty publicznej towarzyszący temu wydarzeniu nabrał z czasem cech swoistych, które chcemy w niniejszym artykule ledwie naszkicować. Zwracamy uwagę na trzy istotne elementy konstytuujące dyskurs okołokrzyżowy: a) kontekst religijny; b) kontekst patriotyczno-martyrologiczny; c) kontekst polityczny. Ukazujemy ponadto, że komunikacja polityczna po 2010 roku unaoczniała jedynie podział społeczny, którego pierwszych symptomów upatrywać należy w rekonfiguracji polskiego systemu partyjnego na przełomie XX i XXI wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** tragedia smoleńska, prezydent, komunikacja polityczna, system polityczny, Polska